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Historical Bafflement of the Chinese People

June 6, 2009 in [A Year of Anniversaries](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

David Kelly, researcher at the University of Technology Sydney, translated the following opinion piece by overseas political commentator Liang Jing. He has published several previous pieces at China Digital Times, including, "[Trigger for an Earthquake in Chinese Society](#)" and "[Where Does Wen Jiabao's Faith Come From?](#)"

One of the most significant cultural phenomena in Chinese society in recent years is the growing interest in history. Everyone—elite and general populace, leftists and rightists—shows an unprecedented enthusiasm for understanding China's past. And in 2009 a series of major historical anniversaries, including the 90th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, have pushed China's "historical fever" to new highs. One of the major reasons stimulating the keen interest in history is that the "reforms" that followed June Fourth, returned China to a "pre-liberation" scenario almost overnight: bureaucratic corruption, moral bankruptcy, social injustice; to the point that, in some important aspects, such as higher education, the status quo in China is not as good as the KMT era, and many phenomena that people thought could not happen again, such as prostitution and the sale of official posts, not only occur, they do so on a far greater scale than in the past.

History has played a big joke on the Chinese, who having experienced countless sufferings and paid the price in countless lives, rather than gaining social progress with their bloody struggle, have turned full circle to find themselves back where they started. How exactly did this come about? Not only the elite, but also many ordinary people are puzzled by this problem. This historical puzzlement of unprecedented numbers of people is what drives China's historically unprecedented "public history movement."

The heroes emerging from this enlightenment are a group of intellectuals who have consciously and unconsciously enhanced the public's knowledge of history. The role they play in promoting China's social progress may far exceed that of the elite in control of the current political discourse. Two figures who, in my opinion, well represent these "modern heroes", are Yi Zhongtian, and Shi Yue, who wrote *Things Ming* under the pen name Dangnian Mingyue [Moonlight Back Then]. One thing these two writers of very different age and experience have in common is use of modern mass media, to tell ordinary people, honestly and wittily, the true logic of the Chinese history in layman's language. They not only subvert the "proper history" as repeatedly distorted by China officialdom, but also upgrade the "unofficial history" of China to new levels, because their telling of Chinese history is imbricated with the spirit and values of modern civilisation.

The old tales retold by Yi Zhongtian and Shi Yue, are clearly a cultural rebellion not only against the official historiography and its materials, but against the CPC's political message as well. Because they tell people—the younger generation in particular—there are no differences in human terms between the emperors of thousands of years ago and the big shots in the political arena today; no political figures, therefore, should be mystified or treated as sacred. The CPC rulers understand the political implication of this cultural rebellion, of course, hence do not allow the likes of Yi Zhongtian to extend their historical fascination to the CPC's history. As relations between the KMT and the CPC ease, however, more restricted areas of history are being broken, and as the fruits of research of the network of overseas Chinese continue to break the CPC blockade, a new generation of intellectuals in the PRC can see more and more of the whole picture of China's modern history.

Even so, optimism about the Chinese people waking up from their historical bafflement, and avoiding being led into another great disaster is hardly called for. The level of materials and artifacts of the China of 90 years ago cannot be compared to today's, of course; but the degree of political tolerance of those in power, the morale and ideological independence of academia, the energetic spirit of young people in China of that day, were incomparable greater than now. Had they seen the deference and

obedience of faculty and students “dancing attendance” upon Hu Jintao when he came to Chinese Agriculture University on May 3, the students and scholars who took part in the May Fourth Movement would have given it a thumbs down.

The paradox of history is that the historical responsibility for China’s subsequent big disasters lies precisely with the movers and shakers of the May Fourth Movement 90 years ago. So, today, many of China’s intellectual elite hold severely critical attitudes towards May Fourth cultural radicalism, arguing that cultural conservatism should be the guideline for China’s future development.

I accept that cultural radicalism takes some of the blame for the disasters of the last century, but fail to understand the actual proposals of cultural conservatism. Will cultural conservatism be able to succeed where cultural radicalism has failed? Such simplistic thinking is disturbing. Connected to China’s present realities, the regime controls unprecedented resources, and has formed a huge bureaucratic class who are incapable of providing basic social security to the majority of the population. Officials in Guizhou prostituting young girls [1], profiteers in Ningxia suborning judges in a joint fraud [2]—appalling scandals like these show that the regime is losing its governing capacity. What does it actually mean to call for cultural conservatism at such times? Won’t a day come when the Chinese people, once again falling into historical bafflement, find that when making a stand is called for, no one is there to make it?

* Liang Jing, “Zhongguoren de lishi kunhuo” [Historical bafflement of the Chinese people], 5 May 2009 [梁京：“中国人的历史困惑”，2009年5月5日.]

[1] Wang Zhiqiu, “Guizhou Xishui gongzhi ren yuan shexian piaoshe younü an kaiting shenli” [Trial of public officials in Xishui, Guizhou charged with prostituting young girls], Xinlang, 8 April 2009 [汪志球：“贵州习水公职人员涉嫌嫖宿幼女案开庭审理”，新浪，2009年4月8日 (<http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2009-04-08/201517570490.shtml>).].

[2] Huang Xiuli, “Ta ba 25 ming faguan la xiashui” [He dragged 25 judges underwater], Nanfang zhoumo, 30 April 2009 [黄秀丽：“他把25名法官拉下水”，南方周末，2009年4月30日 (<http://www.nanfangdaily.com.cn/epaper/nfzm/content/20090430/ArticleA05002FM.htm>).].